HOMECOMING

American Ballet Theatre dancer to perform in Lafayette Tuesday night

By STACEY COURVILLE
Advertizer Entertainment Editor

Many professional ballet dancers began dreaming of their careers as toddlers in dance classes. But one Lafayette native, who is now a dancer with a prestigious ballet company, tumbled into his career choice as a 12-year-old boy.

John Gardner is a dancer with the New York's American Ballet Theatre, which is under the artistic direction of Mikhail Baryshnikov.

He and his fiancee, Amanda McKerrow, also an ABT dancer, will perform in Lafayette's Municipal Auditorium at 8 p.m. Tuesday for the annual Lafayette Ballet gala performance.

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Lafayette native John Gardner

Quinn Ashton from Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet came to Lafayette as a guest instructor at my dance school, I became interested in ballet,” he said.

While growing up, his older sister took ballet lessons, so he was familiar with a few of the basics. Although not many boys were taking ballet lessons in Acadia many years ago, he said his family was in favor of his decision.

Decision Accepted

“My father was always very interested in the arts,” Gardner said. “As little children, we grew up with the arts and open about them. So we danced a lot as well. We didn't look down on it. Like other arts, it was accepted in my household.”

The 22-year-old dancer is the son of Katherine Gardner and the late William Gardner, who active in local Little Theater productions.

Naturally, Gardner sees a lot of differences between tumbling and ballet.

“Tumbling was like playing because you performed tricks,” he said. “Ballet is completely different, both physically and mentally. It requires a lot more concentration.”

After only eight months of ballet training in Lafayette, Gardner was accepted into the National Academy of Arts in Chicago, Ill. In addition to academics, the school concentrates on making dancers.

“I went to the Academy for four years,” the young dancer recalled. “I had eight classes from eight o'clock until noon. After lunch, I took two hours of ballet and two hours of lessons in other dance forms.

Family Involvement

“My mother has been very supportive of my dancing. When I went to Champaign, she and my sister came to the school with me. My mother was very involved in the school. She worked in the school office, was a house mother and was selected as dean of students.

“It helped a lot having her there. A lot of the kids complained about homesickness. I sometimes missed home, but my mother and sister were at school with me and that made things easier.”

When he was 16, Gardner traveled to New York City. He stayed with another Lafayette native, Lois Hesterly (mother of New York City Ballet dancers Leslie and Melinda Roy), while auditioning for the American Ballet Theatre school.

After being accepted and spending a summer in the school, Gardner was accepted into the American Ballet Theatre, the company's second, smaller touring group. He spent a year performing with this group and in 1978 became a member of the American Ballet Theatre.

Since then, Gardner's life has been very hectic.

“I'm a corps dancer, but I don't dance corps parts,” he explained. “I've been doing solo work.

Rehearse, Rehearse, Rehearse

“I spend a lot of time in rehearsal learning ballets. We have class everyday for an hour-and-a-half. Our rehearsal schedule is five or six hours per day. On performing days, we rehearse three or four hours.

“I don't have much time to myself. We get one day off per week and it's like a blessing. It is the only day to sit

see and relax.”

How does Gardner feel about working with the internationally acclaimed Baryshnikov?

“It is very interesting,” he said. “He is my director, but he is also a wonderful dancer. I work with him everyday so naturally, I don't see as everyone else does. I'm sure being a celebrity isn't easy and he has to be seen.

“Just seeing him dance is my past helped me along. I first saw him perform when I was in Champaign and it was an inspiration.”

Gardner is currently participating in the American Ballet Theatre's annual national tour with performances in Washington, D.C., Miami, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis and Detroit. The dancers perform in each city for a week or two.

Vacation Performance

This year's tour is coming to a close and Gardner and McKerrow will be in Lafayette during their week off.

Gardner met McKerrow after he joined the American Ballet Theatre in 1982.

“We met through the company, went out and things just fell into place,” Gardner said. “We haven't set a wedding date yet.

“It really makes things easier when you can share them with someone who knows exactly what you mean.”

Gardner plans to continue dancing for many more years. One of his career goals is to dance as many new roles as he can. However, on day, he hopes to “have a more normal life and raise some children.”

But for now, Gardner is looking forward to performing in Lafayette.

“I will be fun to perform in my hometown,” he said. “But I'm also looking forward to seeing my family, especially my nieces and nephews.”